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WHY I CHOSE AMERICA

As Germany went down to defeat in World War II, Hitler's top scientists faced a momentous choice: Should they surrender to Russia or to the United States? In this exclusive article, the most famous of them all tells you how he reached his decision to seek a new, rewarding way of life

by Wernher von Braun

JUST seven short years ago I was faced with the most important decision of my life. As a German scientist under Adolf Hitler, I was in charge of the V-2 program creating the deadly rocket-weapons with which the Nazis brought terror to their enemies in the closing days of the war.

When Germany went through her last-gasp convulsions, with Allied armies racing across the Rhine and the Russians pouring over our borders from the east, I found myself in an unusual position. Because of my role in the development of what was probably Germany's most advanced and secret weapon, I was able to choose which enemy I would surrender myself to—the Americans or the Russians.

You might think offhand that my unhesitating choice

would have been the Russians. After all, I had been living for twelve years under the totalitarian Nazi regime, where I had heard nothing but contempt for the "softness" of America and the weakness of democracy. And, despite all the anti-Communist propaganda that flooded Germany, we had enjoyed a brief wartime honeymoon with Stalin until Hitler suddenly attacked him.

Yet, when the moment for choice came, I chose America. It may be that, as I tell my story, you will come to understand why.

TODAY I live in a typical American town. Perhaps you have been in it. The town is Huntsville, Ala., 80 miles north of Birmingham. Nearby are the vast establishments of the Redstone Arsenal of U. S. Army Ordnance.

I am technical director of the arsenal's Guided Missile Development Group.

Here in America, even as an enemy, I am free to go where I please and live where I please. I have just built my own three-bedroom cedar-shingle home with terrace on a nice hill at the edge of Huntsville. I guess you would call it a ranch-type house. It has a pleasant outlook into the valley, with a mountain on one side. The view of the forest is beautiful, particularly when it turns golden red.

I built this home with the help of an FHA loan. The monthly payment on it is \$61, and that includes both mortgage payment and taxes. I think it is a good deal.

Living with me to enjoy this new home are my wife, Maria, whom I married after coming to America, and our young daughters, Iris and Margrit. Both were born in America, Margrit just a few weeks ago. They, of course, are American citizens by birth. Maria and I still must (Continued on page 111)



THE AUTHOR, noted rocket genius, has his first papers for American citizenship

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Why I Chose America

(Continued from page 15)

wait a while. She is my second cousin and came as my bride from Germany in 1947. We have both taken out our first citizenship papers.

Never for a moment have I regretted my decision to cast my lot with democracy rather than authoritarianism. And I don't believe that any of the 100-odd colleagues who came with me to Huntsville have had any regrets, either. When we packed up our secret equipment and data at our rocket laboratories in eastern Germany, we resolved to try to stick together as a team—on America's side.

Today, we live in homes scattered in all parts of Huntsville. You might think we would be an indigestible lump to swallow, even for such a famed digester of alien groups as the U. S. A. What has happened has startled me almost as much as the local natives, who at first were as skeptical about us as we were curious about them.

TODAY we prefer hominy grits to sauerkraut and whisky to schnapps. Many of our youngsters are dating sons and daughters of Huntsville natives and several of our scientists and engineers have married American girls. More than 30 babies have been born to our group in the United States.

Most of us have become enthusiastic and active members of the Huntsville Lutheran churches. Many of us have also become red-hot hometown boosters. Huntsville proper has a population of 18,000. But I overheard an ex-German colleague tell a visitor proudly that Greater Huntsville has a population of 35,000. I've been a guest speaker at dinners of the local Rotarians, Elks, Kiwanis, and Lions. Some of us are even members of the Huntsville Junior Chamber of Commerce. In fact, one of us is now vice-president.

But I am getting ahead of myself. I would like to tell you first why we chose to come to America. It helps explain what has happened since.

In the spring of 1945, the missile laboratories which I directed were in the eastern part of Germany, at Peenemunde on the Baltic. We were directly in the path of the onrushing Russians.

When we could hear the Russian guns booming 50 miles away I began getting a bewildering array of urgent directives telling me what to do with our top-secret staff and equipment.

Even under a dictatorship you have not only a Hitler, but a lot of little Hitlers issuing orders!

The orders telling us to stay put were from the local Nazi *gauleiter*, the local army front commander, and the security police (Gestapo) under the command of the dreaded Heinrich Himmler. All these were harshly worded. They warned that any attempt to move would constitute desertion.

But two other directives, from the

ministry of armaments and army ordnance, instructed us to move westward, away from the Russians. It dawned on me that these conflicting orders opened up for me a chance to make a momentous choice. At stake was the great body of scientific know-how developed over the years at Peenemunde. There was no question that, in our field of rocket and guided-missile development, we were far ahead of the rest of the world.

To anyone but a fanatic it was clear that Germany was finished. I had, in a matter of months, seen Hitler change from a bombastic, supercharged Fuehrer who would tolerate no opposition to a subdued, broken old man who coughed constantly and wore ridiculous steel-rimmed glasses such as grandmothers wear on the stage.

As I first pondered the situation I saw two possibilities. The first was that we scientists turn our backs on all that we had built. With surrender we could blow up our equipment, burn our data, and try to slip back into German civilian life in tight-lipped silence. I rejected that as a sterile, negative, and probably futile solution.

The other possibility was to entrust our knowledge to one of the victors. Realistically, this meant choosing between Russia and the United States.

Why did I not pick Russia? I don't blame you for wondering. Personally, I had fared relatively rather well under totalitarianism. But I had also had some experiences which had gradually taught me to be wary and even frightened of dictatorship in any form.

In my youth I became imbued with the idea of building a machine which would, by harnessing natural energy, take me to the moon. I and my fellow spaceship enthusiasts in Germany were so excited by the problem of conquering space that in 1932 we gladly accepted research facilities provided by the German army. Later, when the Nazis took over Germany, we had no doubt that the army, true to its tradition, would remain non-political.

I WAS still a youngster in my early 20's and frankly didn't realize the significance of the changes in political leadership. My father was wiser. He had been what corresponds to Secretary of Agriculture under President von Hindenburg, but quit all public offices when Hitler came into power. He warned me that it was all going to end in tragedy for Germany and many other people, too. But I was too wrapped up in rockets to heed his warning.

Only gradually did it dawn on me that I and many other scientists in the world were being caught in a dilemma. The machines we built in our enthusiasm for a noble cause were being put to use to dominate or enslave other men.

In a few years our country, under Hitler's leadership, found itself engulfed in a war it couldn't end. With war, the Nazis could appeal to the patriotism of all us Germans, and they tightened their grip on the army. Soon we key scientists found Nazi party observers standing at our elbows.

In the early days of the war Hitler



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didn't pay much attention to us. He planned to win the war in a few months. But when he found himself hopelessly involved in a long, desperate struggle he began groping for a miracle weapon. Someone reminded him of our rockets. Together with my boss from German Army Ordnance, I was summoned to his headquarters. This was in mid-1942. Hitler professed great skepticism about rockets, and sent us home. But a few months later we were called for again. This time we could show him the film of our first successful V-2 launching. When he saw it he was enraptured. Afterward he began pacing the room and talking to the walls. In his mind he began setting off thousands of rockets at once, producing shattering booms. The prospect seemed to delight him. Suddenly the V-2 became his personal discovery.

He inquired about output, and then curtly began tongue-lashing my boss and me for being so far away from mass production. Almost immediately we were launched on a tremendous program, and overwhelmed with funds and efficiency experts.

As the V-2 became the nation's top-priority program, Heinrich Himmler, head of the Gestapo, decided we must come directly under his control, so that he could share in the glory. He invited me to see him. This brutal man with puffy cheeks and squinting eyes began: "I understand you're having a lot of difficulty with army bureaucracy and red tape." I smelled his scheme and insisted there was no undue red tape. He proposed that we come under his jurisdiction, and I said I could see no point to it.

THREE weeks later members of his Gestapo came to my quarters at 3 A. M., awoke and arrested me. After two weeks in prison I was hauled up for a faked trial. It was then I began to learn at first hand about the realities of any totalitarian regime. The men in power—and they often hold power because of machines developed by us engineers and scientists—never know when a friend may become an enemy. So their police spies build up a file on *everyone*, ready to be used whenever it appears expedient. They had a very complete one on me, which included some political remarks I had made years before.

Fortunately for me, my plight was brought to Hitler's attention and he was warned he would never get his V-2 machine unless I was released. So Hitler ordered Himmler to unhand me.

Some months afterward my country was crumbling in defeat. The Russians were approaching. I faced the problem of choosing in my mind a custodian for the machines and the knowledge we had developed at Peenemunde.

Perhaps you can see by now why I felt repugnance at the thought of entrusting our rocket machine to the totalitarian Russians. Whereas the democracies ask how can we reconcile our machines with our basic concepts of individual freedom, the Russians are indifferent to human freedom. Their rulers are using the power of machines to impose a police state on as much of Asia and eastern Europe as they can.

This difference is why my choice was the West. The reason I chose America in particular is that Americans had a reputation for having an especially intense devotion to individual freedom and human rights.

Furthermore, their traditional disinterest in conquest and their careful system of checks and balances in government offered the highest guarantee that any knowledge we entrusted to them would not be used wantonly.

With the Russian guns knocking at our door, I confided the situation to my closest associates, and found that they harbored the same thoughts. They agreed that we should try to move within reach of the Americans and should try to keep our team together. Thereupon I called a mass meeting of all Peenemunde employees and read to them only those directives which ordered us to move.

IN THE following hectic days we started moving all the laboratory equipment that was movable. Our destination was Bleichrode, south of the Harz Mountains. Unfortunately, we there fell into the hands of a local tyrant who was the most ruthless man I ever met. He was one of Himmler's SS generals named Kammler.

Kammler packed 450 of us off to a camp in Bavaria where we would be "safe and able to work undisturbed for Hitler's ultimate victory." This forbidding camp was surrounded by a high barbed-wire fence. It obviously was Kammler's game to tuck us away as hostages, later to be used as pawns in a deal with either Russia or the West to save his own neck.

An SS lieutenant was accompanying us. I persuaded him that the camp was an easy target for American planes and that one bomb could thus wipe out the last chance for the "ultimate victory." Thus we succeeded in having the group scattered into 25 Bavarian villages. I was in an Alpine mountain lodge when the war ended. We sent my brother Magnus down the mountain on a bike to locate and make contact with the Americans, because he could speak English better than the rest of us. Soon we were all being assembled and interrogated.

Officers at the U. S. Army detention center in Germany questioned me severely for several weeks. Finally a colonel put this blunt question to me: "Do you think you could become a loyal citizen of the United States?"

I said I would like to try. The fact that I had voluntarily put myself in their hands carried some weight. Still, they were taking no chances. They gave me a one-year contract to work in, and for, America. And they kept me under constant guard.

My arrival at the Pentagon Building in Washington, in September, 1945, created quite a stir. People in the information booths stared in curiosity at me because I happened to be the first live German to reach Washington after the war ended.

During the following weeks almost all the other top scientists and engineers from my missile-development staff at Peenemunde began arriving. And when

our contracts were renewed, a year later, we were permitted to bring our families.

Of those whom I consider the top missile men we had at Peenemunde, 100 eventually came to America, while only one went to Russia. That 100 to 1 ratio, I believe, indicates the relative appeal of the two countries to a scientist.

Our first assignment on reaching America was to show Americans at the White Sands proving ground in New Mexico how to assemble and shoot captured V-2's. Once they learned the knack, American scientists began using the V-2's for high-altitude research purposes, which had been our hope. They replaced the warheads with instruments for recording conditions in the great unknown upper atmosphere. Such information has great peacetime as well as military value. The V-2's at last were serving a constructive purpose!

We ex-Germans were quartered at Fort Bliss, a large military post near El Paso, Texas. It was while there that our families began arriving. We started wearing cowboy boots and sombreros.

When I was first informed that I was going to be sent to El Paso I was intensely curious to see it. I knew it was a part of the great American "Wild West." As a boy I had been raised on translations of Zane Grey and western stories by a German (!) named Karl May, who turned out about 40 wild-western books for youngsters without stepping foot inside the U. S. A.

You can imagine my surprise to find a modern metropolis with traffic lights, airport, and skyscrapers. This change had come in less than two decades, which told me something about America's tremendous vitality.

OUR youngsters began going to the El Paso schools, and getting an occasional bloody nose in the schoolyard for being dirty ex-enemies.

We told them they would have to take care of themselves. Soon they were accepted and became members of neighborhood play groups.

I had assumed I would encounter plenty of hostility as an "ex-enemy big shot." But I never did. In America you don't seem to carry grudges, as do many Europeans who have been enemies. Soon after I reached El Paso I had to spend several weeks in a ward of an army hospital because of a liver ailment. There I was surrounded by wounded GI's back from fighting fronts.

Officials advised me to hide my identity, but I couldn't conceal my still-broken English. The GI's sized me up with uncomfortable accuracy, and began calling me "The Dutchman." But they also invited me to join their blackjack poker games!

When we first came to Huntsville to work on the Army's guided-missile program we were still somewhat cliquish, and became known as "the German colony." Today, however, we have become dispersed both physically and socially. At Peenemunde in Germany, we rocket experimenters lived in an army-built residential district and had relatively little contact with the neighboring communities. In Huntsville, there is no

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restriction or rule on where we make our home.

We have found that Huntsville is full of wonderful, friendly people with congenial tastes. Most of us have now built up our own circles of friends among them. In the case of my own family, our next-door neighbors now are Dr. and Mrs. Robert Ross. He is a native of Massachusetts and a fine chemist. His wife has befriended my wife in many ways. Their son Mike and my daughter Iris (both age 3) are daily playmates.

It was at Dr. Ross's suggestion that my wife and I spent our vacation last summer in the Wisconsin woods near Ephraim between Green Bay and Lake Michigan. He called it real air-conditioned country. We found it delightful. The trout fishing was especially fine.

ONE of the homes in Huntsville where Mrs. von Braun and I visit frequently is that of Mr. and Mrs. Edwin Jones. Mr. Jones is a local real-estate man, and also a brigadier general in the U. S. National Guard. His wife is a former concert pianist. One night each week the Joneses have an open-house musical evening. I enjoy these immensely, because I'm a frustrated pianist myself.

My parents, the Baron and Baroness Magnus von Braun, who were driven from our ancient homestead in Germany by the Communists, now live near us. They have their own circle of friends among the older Huntsville residents. Recently, when Father was sick, he was smothered with flowers from his new friends and neighbors.

Today the security restrictions on me are not much more stringent than they are on any scientist doing highly classified work. Certainly I have far more freedom of movement than I ever had as a "trusted" high official in Hitler's Germany. There I was watched constantly. When Himmler's men brought me to trial, they made a big point of the fact that I used a little government-owned plane for my business trips from Peenemunde. I had used it there for years, but still they tried to blow that up into "proof" that I was plotting to skip the country.

My job for the U. S. Army takes me by train, commercial airplane, and car to factories and suppliers in many parts of America. The other day I counted, and found that I have been in 30 of our states. My sedan, which I bought new in 1947, now has 70,000 miles on it. That includes a trip through the magnificent Grand Canyon area. The two major sections of the U. S. that I still haven't seen, and wish to see, are the Northwest and New England north of Boston. Michigan, because of its tremendous bustle, is for me the most exciting U. S. state.

It still startles me that I can get in my car and drive for two days and nights without crossing borders or being subject to passport or custom control, such as you constantly encounter in Europe.

The "openness" of America carries over even into the offices. The ex-Germans at first were very much disturbed by the office quarters provided for them. Ten or 15 of them were placed together in a large room to work. In Germany each of us always had his own private cubbyhole. At first they thought it was a part of the Government's no-pampering policy toward ex-enemies. But gradually they noticed that in most government and industrial office buildings there is great openness of layout. And if a man is specially honored with a private office he usually leaves the door wide open, even in the Pentagon. In Germany, we kept doors closed.

As a newcomer with a fresh viewpoint I have been fascinated by many things about America. I have marveled at the supermarkets. In Germany, you have to go to at least five different shops to buy your daily foodstuff. I've been amazed by the mile-long assembly lines, the almost universal use of wonderful household electrical appliances, the beauty of the land, and America's openhanded hospitality. I have been pleasantly startled by the forthright way Americans are free to criticize even the highest government officials. The personal riches and satisfying way of life that are available even to a modest-salaried government employee like myself cannot, I imagine, be equaled anywhere in the world today.

Some things about America, however,

have disturbed me a little. I'll take the liberty of mentioning three.

—American farmers seem rapidly to be becoming less self-sufficient and independent. A typical German farmer raises a variety of foods. He eats off the land and sells his surplus to the nearest market. He sees little money, but is never hungry. And he is fiercely independent. U. S. farmers, in contrast, seem more and more devoted to a single crop. They buy their groceries at the store. This may all be more efficient, but they are paying a stiff price for that efficiency. They are more vulnerable and must depend on a benevolent government to protect them from disasters.

—Americans are too emotional in their approach to the world situation. They blow hot and cold, depending on the news in the morning newspaper, and force their government in Washington also to blow hot and cold. When Stalin speaks belligerently, America adds billions for defense. Then when, in a U. S. election year, Stalin shrewdly begins waving olive branches, Washington lawmakers compete to see who can cut the most billions from projects already under way.

THESE hot-and-cold crises, I fear, are severely taxing the sensitive U. S. economy. Furthermore, they dismay other people in the Free World who are looking to America for leadership. Good leadership requires consistency. In the long run, it would be cheaper and safer if the various factions in America would get together and work out a mutually agreeable long-range program, and stick to it.

—Americans, I suspect, have become too complacent about their achievements. They, of course, have obvious reasons for pride. But as soon as any people become too proud of what their forefathers and their own generation have achieved, the desire to meet new challenges ceases. The greatest civilizations, such as the Roman, started declining the moment they lost their humility. As I see it, one of the tasks of the church in America today is to keep humility awake, to keep the public mindful of Biblical Proverb 16, which deals with the perils of pride.

One of the serious misconceptions I had about this country concerns the role of churches. Perhaps I had better explain this in some detail, because my thinking on religion has undergone considerable change since I came to America.

I had the idea that churches in America were somewhat like clubs. If you wanted to be socially important you were careful to belong to the right church. Probably I picked up this notion years ago while reading a translation of Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*.

Therefore, I was quite surprised to see what a very active church life really exists. In El Paso I found there were a great number of small churches housed in temporary barracks. And I saw pastors getting their congregations together in busses and trucks. To me it all indicated a terrific pioneer spirit.

I frankly had never considered myself the church-going type before coming to

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ROAD TO HELL

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America, and was skeptical of the need for any organized religion. But in the American towns where I went I found myself admiring the work churches were doing in making Christianity alive in the community, and became grateful for the job they did in helping our German families feel at home, including my own.

Another and bigger reason why my thoughts have turned to the churches is that I began realizing the important role organized churches can play in meeting the central problem of mankind today. That paramount problem is tapping the energy of nature with machines for the purpose of freeing humans from the yoke of heavy physical labor, while at the same time safeguarding human freedom.

All our harnessing of nature is evil if it serves only to enslave man to the machine or to the political organizations that control the machines. What the world most needs today, to my mind, are people who will get out and shout for human freedom and the rights of individuals.

The greatest champion of the inherent worth and dignity of every man was Jesus Christ. He taught that every man is a Child of God. He taught that each of us has a gift life on earth for which we must account at the Last Judgment. We can best make our gift life count for something if we vigorously champion the Godly life. This means, as I see it, not only loving one another and praying for our enemies, but supporting with missionary zeal the concept of individual worth.

That is the best insurance I know for permitting man to have his machines and enjoy them, too. And it is the heart of Christianity. That's why I believe America's churches have a big role to play, if they only will.

As in my youth, my eyes are still on the heavens. I still yearn some day to explore the moon. And as a private enthusiasm I have been designing an artificial satellite we could make here on earth and send up in the sky to revolve around the earth 1,000 miles out. Such a manned space platform could be a great force for peace.

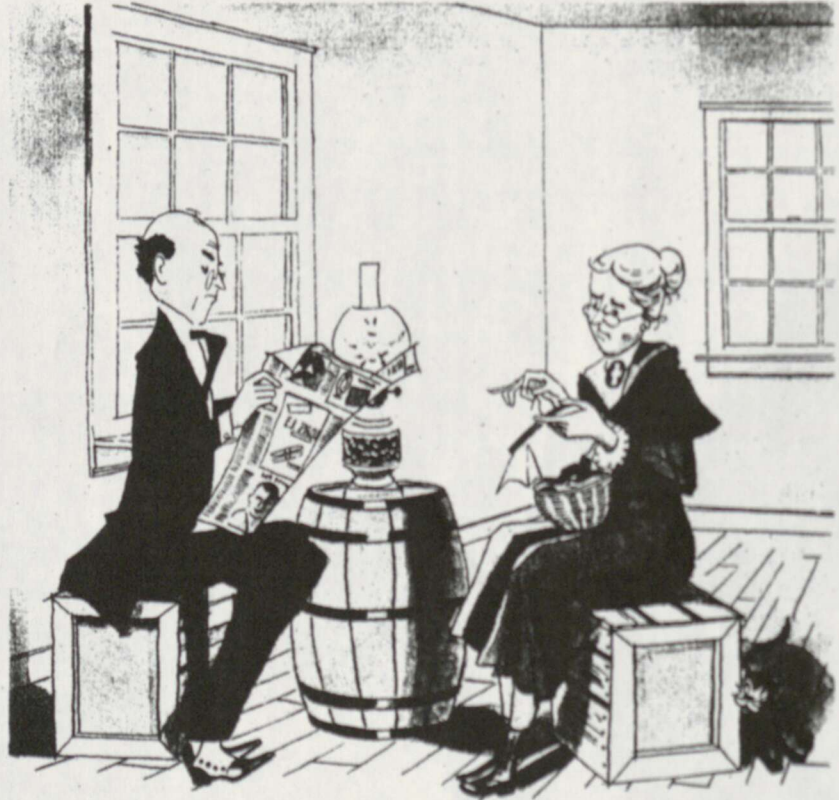
Yes, my eyes are still on the heavens. But I hope they are on them in a more thoughtful and respectful way today. I no longer believe that science alone can give us all the answers to the ultimate realities of the universe above and around us.

I no longer believe that modern technology alone is the answer to the more abundant life here on earth. More is needed for abundance than material plenty, although that, of course, helps.

There can be a truly abundant life only where individual worth is exalted.

Building ships that can travel through space will be fine and adventurous. But right now the greater urgency is learning to live the abundant life with the machines we already have.

The people of America, I believe, have it within their potentialities to lead the world to an answer to this challenging problem. That is why I chose America.



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